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Dominant Acts Expressed (Buss 1981)

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Synonyms

Aggression; Power; Sex differences; Status

Definition

Psychological research suggests men and women employ sex-specific strategies for expressing dominance, and dominant acts are perceived differently based on the sex of the actor. The nature of sex differences in dominance-based behavior, variation in personality and dominance, and ethnographic accounts of dominance in leadership positions are discussed.

Introduction

The role of dominance in the formation of hierarchy is an ancestral feature of social organization humans share with nonhuman primates as well as social animals generally. As a strategy for achieving influence, dominance is likely a cross-cultural universal, yet there are stark sex differences and cultural variation in the universal expression of dominance.

Dominance consists of gaining authority through the use of coercion, fear, aggression, or agonistic threats by social superiors to subordinates (Cheng et al. 2010; Henrich and Gil-White 2001). Patterns of deference behavior follow a semi-stable ranking in a transitive and linear fashion. Within human social hierarchies, there is immense variation in the expression of dominance, and the formation of dominance hierarchies does not necessarily involve direct aggression. Culture, ecology, personality, age, and sex can all influence the ability of and means by which an individual pursues a dominance-based strategy for achieving influence within a group.

Buss (1981) investigates the expression of dominance and the evaluation of dominant acts in reference to established psychological models and reports sex differences in both the desirability and expression of dominant acts. Over the past 35 years, dominance, contrasted with prestige, has become a prominent theoretical framework in models of social status and hierarchy (see Cheng et al. 2014). Here Buss' seminal study is reevaluated, and findings are framed in the context of relevant contemporary literature.

Conceptualizing Variation in Dominance

Symbolic and complex cumulative culture presents humans with a range of opportunities for expressing dominance, and individuals can adjust

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dominance-based strategies for specific situations. Variation in phenotypic expression and personality type can render certain expressions of dominance more amenable for different individuals. For example, dominance can be expressed very directly relying on physical size and agonistic threats or more subtly through prosocial behavior and tactful displays. Buss (1981) tested the expression of dominance in reference to Bakan's (1966) dualistic model of human existence, which suggests human existence – behavior – can take one of two forms; individuals can act agentically, or in masculine fashion with egocentric aims, or individuals can act communally, or in feminine fashion with group goals shaping behavior. In this context, Buss (1981) addresses whether there is a sex difference in the desirability of dominant acts, if dominant acts are perceived to be more desirable when performed by a male, if males and females differ in frequency of performing dominant acts, and if males and females differ in regard to the nature of expressing dominant acts. In addition to identifying important sex difference in the expression of dominance, Buss (1981) seeks to provide evidence counter to the stereotype that dominant behavior is an exclusively male trait. Following Bakan's model, Buss (1981) predicts that the expression and evaluation of dominant acts by males will follow the agentic mode, whereas the evaluation and expression of dominant acts by females will follow the communal mode. Buss (1981) tests these predictions using a two-study design and a sample of undergraduates rating 100 dominant acts on their social desirability and a self-report measure of how often they performed them.

The Expression of Dominance

Despite individual variation in the expression of dominance, evidence suggests males and females have sex-specific adaptations for expressing and assessing dominant behavior. Buss (1981) found males rated egotistic and manipulative acts as more socially desirable than females. Similarly, females rated prosocial, group-centric expressions of dominance as more desirable than males. This profound sex effect reveals men consider more self-serving and egotistical dominant acts as more desirable than women.

To investigate if perceptions of dominance manifest in expressions of dominance, Buss (1981) uses psychometric measure of dominance in comparison to self-report measures of the performance of dominant acts. Among men and women, those who score high on psychometric measures of dominance tend to also report greater frequencies of performing dominant acts. However, the study revealed sex-specific trends in reported expressions of dominance. Dominant men reported performing egoist, self-serving acts of dominance at greater frequencies than women, whereas women's reported acts of dominance were more likely to be prosocial and group focused. According to Buss (1981), the expression of dominance among men is more likely to serve immediate individual level goals; for women, dominant behavior is more likely to increase within-group cohesion.

Buss (1981) revealed women do engage in dominant behavior but tend to do so in a gendered way. Egoistic and prosocial dominance behaviors represent two strategies for achieving social influence within a group, and despite general sex-specific trends, the two strategies are not mutually exclusive or necessarily sex specific. Hawley et al. (2008) suggest there is less distinction between male and female expressions of dominance than previously described and both males and females employ egoist and prosocial strategies for achieving social influence, independent of aggressiveness. Using a sample of German children and peer-report, self-report, and psychometric data, Hawley et al. (2008) measured the propensity to engage in coercive or prosocial strategies, the ability to control group resources, individual dominance and aggression, and social standing. Similar to Buss (1981), key sex differences emerged.

Among children, boys are more likely to value social influence, employ coercive and aggressive strategies in attaining influence, and report success in their attempts at gaining social influence (Hawley et al. 2008). This distinction also manifests in peer reports with children reporting boys are more controlling, coercive, and aggressive

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than females. However, contrary to perspectives emphasizing sex differences in expressions of dominance, several important similarities were documented between boys and girls scoring high on measures of dominance and resource controlling ability.

Children demonstrate a preference in play for bistrategic controllers or those who employ both prosocial and coercive strategies of control (Hawley 2003). Both males and females are perceived as equally effective at controlling resources when using both coercive and prosocial strategies (Hawley et al. 2008). Additionally, bistrategic controllers are equally likely to be male or female, limiting the ability of males to disproportionately control group resources and dynamics when prosocial strategies are considered (Hawley et al. 2008). However, when overt physical aggression is the principal mechanism by which individuals strive to achieve social influence, females are at a disadvantage. Considering relational aggression, girls are perceived to out rank boys (Hawley et al. 2008), a trend that continues across development (Hess and Hagen 2006). These sex differences are widely supported in the psychological literature (Campbell 2002) and in at least one study among hunter-gatherers (Hess et al. 2010).

Females are able to complete with males during childhood through employing a bistrategic approach to social influence. A similar phenomenon emerges among postmenopausal women. Several ethnographic accounts reveal that after their childbearing years, women in small-scale society are more likely to surface as major political agents and achieve positions of leadership in prosocial arenas. This has been termed a "coming of age" for women's sociopolitical influence (Brown and Kerns 1985). Traditionally, during their reproductive years, women are limited in their ability to pursue positions of social influence, and their ability to express social dominance through coercive or prosocial strategies is ineffective.

Dominance and Personality

The propensity to pursue a dominance-based strategy is not solely related to physical size and aggression. Whereas Buss (1981) related the expression of dominance to agentic and communal behavior, contemporary studies have investigated the expression of dominance in the context of variation in personality. In a predominately female sample of undergraduates, Cheng et al. (2010), using a series of psychometric measures, contrast hubristic pride, which is driven by antisocial behavior, arrogance, and conceit, with authentic pride, which is driven by individual accomplishments, success, and confidence. Based on self-report measures, hubristic pride was positively and strongly related to dominance as predicted. Unexpectedly, authentic pride demonstrated a weak positive relationship to dominance as well, independent of other relationships (Cheng et al. 2010). Additionally, dominance was positively related to narcissism, aggression, and extraversion and, to a lesser degree, conscientiousness. Conversely, dominance was negatively associated with agreeableness, social acceptance, and self-esteem (Cheng et al. 2010).

In the described study, the authors do not focus on sex differences. These results reveal patterns in the expression of dominance across personality types independent of sex. Despite variation in the expression of dominant acts, males and females more prone to pursue dominance-based strategies of social influence are likely to share common personality profiles.

Cultural Variation in the Expression of Dominance by Males and Females

The expression of dominance and dominance-based strategies for achieving positions of social influence are very likely universal features of an inherited leader-follower psychology. However, ecological and sociocultural features contribute to variation in the expression and utility of dominance-based behaviors in unique ways for males and females. Contrasting ethnographic examples from egalitarian populations, or populations which lack inherited status differences, have little wealth disparity and are generally characterized by greater gender equality, with stratified populations, which are characterized by graded differences in inherited status and wealth and demonstrate increased gender inequality and

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reveal the influence of cultural systems on sex-specific expressions of dominance.

In egalitarian societies, leaders and high status individuals have limited direct authority over subordinates, and overly assertive expressions of dominance can be subverted through group-wide resistance, deposition, or physical retaliation (Boehm 1999). Egalitarian societies tend to lack expressions of dominance in sociopolitical organization and among the Mbuti, Turnbull (1965:187) relates that, “it is plain, then, that while any movement toward individual authority, conscious or otherwise, is sharply countered, and while individual authority is virtually nil, there is nonetheless a clear basic framework to support the values of the hunting band. There is the division of leadership, according to field, throughout the entire band, yet there is the midcamp site from which anyone may harangue all present.” With dispersed and contextual leadership, Mbuti society accomplishes effective organization yet maintains and promotes an openness of dissent. The ability of any one individual to effectively employ dominance-based strategies in leadership positions is limited.

Within the egalitarian system of the Iban, men engage in ruthless between-group competition and head-hunting which leads to within group positions of influence based on respect but also fear, intimidation, and threats of physical aggression. Counter to these egoist expressions of dominance, women are expected to provide a more prosocial service among couples with considerable social influence. Sandin (1967:56) describes, “wives of these heroes should also try to excel other women in various skills. Without these qualities, they could neither have the position to receive the human heads which their husbands hunted. . .nor could they become leaders of other women if they are bad, greedy and jealous. All women who are married to such prominent persons should, therefore, initiate good deeds in order to match with the courage and qualities of their husbands.” Egalitarian societies both reward and resist expressions of dominance. Dominance-based strategies can secure group interests in between-group competition but must be resisted or balanced with prosocial investments in the context of within-group collective action and social organization.

The emergence of inequality and social stratification is linked to an increase in dominance-based strategies for social influence. With an increase in monopolization over resources and social influence and a reduction in equality, leaders are able to expand the domains through which dominance can be expressed (Kaplan et al. 2009). By exploiting followers and exercising dominance across social relationships, including kin groups and in marriage patterns, in economic systems, using organized military forces, and across broad ideological values, leaders effectively maintain and control positions of authority and are able to pass on these positions to their offspring (Earle 1997). Amhara chiefs are known to strategically and preemptively act to maintain their social control, and in one example, it was noted that the chief, “expects to see his tenant-followers quite often. If they stay away for more than a reasonable period of time, he will suspect that they are plotting against him or currying the favor of some other important man” (Hoben 1963:182). Cultural systems and sociopolitical organization grant chiefs excessive power and ample opportunities to employ dominance-based strategies. Among the Bemba, Richards (1940:106) describes, “the sanctions for a chief’s authority are numerous, and they were still greater in the old days. . .much of his power also rested in the old days on force. A chief practised savage mutilations on those who offended him, injured his interests, laughed at him or members of his family, or stole his wives. A number of these mutilated men and women still survive in Bemba country today. Command over the army and over the supply of guns also lays in the chief’s hands, and there is no doubt that the greatness of the Bena nandu rested to a large extent on fear. The people explain that the royal family were named after the crocodile because ‘they are like crocodiles that seize hold of the common people and tear them to bits with their teeth’.” With authority over wide social domains and the sanctioned use of force at their disposal, leaders in highly stratified societies maintain near divine positions of power and wield

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this power absolutely, instilling fear in followers through threats, aggression, and deadly force.

Though opportunities for dominance-based strategies for achieving social influence among women are rare in stratified traditional societies, they are not universally absent. Among the matrilineal Trobriands, Austen (1940:272) mentions that, “Botabalu lives in a high-chief’s house, and has women and girls for her companions, who keep the house clean and tidy…she is a stout woman and does not walk about. Most of her time is spent in the village, and because she is a great chieftainess, with many kinsmen and numerous villages under her rule, she is greatly feared by all.” In the context of hereditary social stratification, female leaders, though to a lesser degree than males, also employ dominance-based strategies to achieve and maintain positions of influence.

Conclusion

Buss (1981) provided a framework for understating and investigating sex differences in dominance behavior. Most notably, males tend to use dominance-based strategies to achieve personal, egocentric goals, whereas females tend to use them to achieve group-level goals.

Further research in the field both supported this distinction and revealed caveats. Among Western children, when both dominance-based and prosocial strategies are considered, there is little distinction between high-ranking males and females (Hawley et al. 2008). Additionally, the personality profiles of males and females who employ dominance-based strategies in social interactions are likely very similar, with both trending toward narcissism, extroversion, and aggression (Cheng et al. 2010).

Across a diverse range of leaders in traditional societies, expressions of dominance are associated with positions of social influence. However, the nature of expressions of dominance varies greatly between egalitarian and stratified societies and between sexes. Cultural context and sociopolitical organization influence the viability of specific types of dominance-based strategies, but do not completely prevent them.

The dominance model adopted from ethology and animal social hierarchies has been incredibly influential within the social sciences investigating leadership, status competition, and social influence. Buss’ seminal work remains an important foundational study in this field.

Cross-References

► Men’s Egoist Dominant Acts
► Women’s Prosocial Dominant Acts

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